

Leadership Styles and Generational Differences in Manufacturing and Service Organizations

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Background and purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine generational differences and leadership style preferences in service and manufacturing organizations in south-eastern (SE) Slovenia. The focus was on preferred leadership approaches and generational differences.

Methods: Quantitative research was conducted using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to collect data on a sample of 208 employees in manufacturing and service organizations in SE Slovenia. The questionnaire was distributed online and responses were analysed using Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, Shapiro-Wilk test, and the Kruskal Wallis test.

Results: The results showed that the transformational leadership style was most preferred by the respondents, followed by the transactional and the least preferred was the laissez-faire style. A significant generational difference was found in the preference for the transactional leadership style, with Baby Boomers showing the highest preference and Generation Z the lowest.

Conclusion: Although the study was limited to SE Slovenia and generalizability is limited, the results suggest that organizations should provide leadership training adapted to generational preferences to promote effective leadership. Future research should consider longitudinal and sector-specific studies, as well as the inclusion of variables such as cultural background and organizational culture.

Keywords: Management, Generational cohort, Leadership style, Leadership, Employees, Organization

1 Introduction

Organizations face numerous challenges in a competitive global environment. Increasingly, organizations are becoming more age-diverse, managers are faced with leading teams composed of individuals from different generations, each defined with different experiences, perspectives, and expectations. The ageing process raises numerous questions about economic development, labour productivity, and global population trends. Individuals who work longer contribute more to economic activity,

facilitate knowledge transfer, provide valuable skills, and generate their income (Deller & Walwei, 2022, pp. 25-43). However, the challenge lies in leading and engaging multi-generational employees with different life perspectives, values, and needs without ignoring their uniqueness.

The impact of generational differences is felt in all segments of employee management and leadership styles in organizations, thus impacting the applicability and effectiveness of various leadership styles within organizations (Pary & Urwin, 2011, p. 80). This study aims to fill this gap by shedding light on the interaction between generational cohorts and leadership styles in service and manufactur-

ing organizations. In doing so, the results offer insights to guide leadership development and practices in age-diverse work settings.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Leadership styles

Fischer and Sitkin (2023) identify eight positive leadership styles (authentic, charismatic, consideration and initiating structure, empowering, ethical, instrumental, servant, and transformational leadership) and two negative ones (abusive supervision and destructive leadership).

A leadership style is a set of activities employed by a leader to influence interactions with colleagues (Faugier & Woolnoug, 2002, p. 28). Effective leadership styles enable employees to achieve high levels of performance with minimal disruptions across various situations. Although leadership styles depend on individual leaders, they are also strongly influenced by the manager themselves or predetermined by the organization in which they work (Heller & Wilpert 1977, p. 78).

In studying leadership styles, researchers have primarily focused on the manager's characteristics and behaviour, considering the impact of leadership styles on employee motivation and organizational performance (Chelladurai 1984, p. 27). The most prevalent leadership models include the personality traits (competencies) model of managers, the behavioural model of managers, the situational model, and other leadership styles such as transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire approaches (Howatson-Jones 2004, p. 21).

The concept of transformational leadership (Bass, 1997, p. 19) has gained widespread theoretical and practical acceptance (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2009, p. 421). Two types of transformational leadership are proposed: authentic and inauthentic, also referred to as pseudo-transformational or unethical leadership (Zhu, Avolio, Riggio, & Sosik, 2011, p. 802). The fundamental premise of authentic leadership is that authentic leaders respect their true values, beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses, effectively leading and following the organization by expressing their unique personal identity and style (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011, p. 1142). Authentic leadership is genuine, sincere, positive, trustworthy, and reliable (Chambers Clark, 2009, p. 19). Inauthentic leadership, on the other hand, is characterized by a lack of commitment to altruistic values and behavior that is inconsistent with these values. It is based on a flawed understanding of free choice, particularly for personal benefit rather than community benefit (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 181).

Transactional leadership, conversely, relies on a system of rewards and punishments: employees are rewarded for their success and are either not rewarded or even pe-

nalized for their failures (Van Wart, 2003, p. 214). Transactional leaders lead with specific incentives and motivate employees by exchanging one thing for another. Leaders exchange rewards for employee compliance (Yukl, 1989, pp. 24–25). Transactional leaders establish a foundation for employee development through communication, clarifying desired goals and objectives, outcomes, and consequently rewarding employees upon their achievement (Sosik & Goldshalk, 2000, p. 365).

The laissez-faire leadership style is characterized by its highly inactive approach, as the manager avoids assuming responsibility and making decisions. Laissez-faire leadership is a style employed by managers who express passivity or indecisiveness concerning tasks and coworkers, or who intentionally deny responsibility for specific aspects of the leadership process. Managers recognize that their primary task is to resolve problems, scandals, and crises resulting from employees failing to adequately perform their duties (Van Wart, 2008, pp. 33–34). This style is associated with decision-making within a group framework (Grohar-Murray & Langan, 2011, p. 23).

The diversity and multigenerational composition of the workforce challenge management to identify and manage generational differences and to change work organization and management approaches to motivate employees to stay on the job (Mahmoud, Reisel, Grigoriou, Fuxman, & Mohr, 2020, pp. 1–2). According to Wolor, Nurkin, and Citriadin (2021, p. 105), the dominant individuals of Generation Y are image-conscious, highly creative, and technologically advanced. Mahmoud, Reisel, Grigoriou, Fuxman, and Mohr added that they are self-confident and can offer new suggestions and ideas to management (2020, p. 7). The authors also noted that the youngest Generation Z expects financial rewards for a job well done, is digitally and technologically savvy, and is not willing to sacrifice their time for the organizations at any cost (p. 6). Soumaki, Kianto, and Vanhala (2019, p. 7) found that Generation X and Y employees are individualistic and more likely to work in teams. Sampson (2020, p. 68) found that individual consideration and ethical leadership influence employee growth, success, and motivation (Valenti, 2019, p. 75). The process of developing an effective leadership theory involves recognising and transforming the various generational characteristics into leadership behaviours that are adapted to the characteristics of the new generations and contexts (Putriastuti & Stasi, 2019, p. 108).

2.2 Definition and Differences of Generational Cohorts

Generations are flexible social constructs and their boundaries evolve over time and space (Campbell, Campbell, Siedor, & Twenge, 2015, p. 325). Ažman, Ruzzier, and Škerlavaj (2014, pp. 43–44) argued that individuals are

often characterised by the traits attributed to their respective generational cohort. King, Murillo, and Lee (2017, p. 94) found that the attitudes, beliefs, and values of a particular generation play an important role in behaviour and attitudes toward work. According to Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (1999, p. 30), generations are divided into: the Veteran Generation, (born between 1922 and 1943), the Baby Boom Generation, (born between 1943 and 1960), Generation X (born between 1960 and 1980), and Generation Y (born between 1980 and 1995). Dimock (2019, pp. 1-7) provided a similar classification and adds Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2010), which is already entering or has entered the workforce. After 2010, Generation Alpha has emerged, but is not yet in the labour force.

Coetzee, Ferreira, and Shunmugum (2017, p. 9) found that members of the Baby Boom generation had the highest levels of work engagement, which declined with each subsequent generation. Statnicke, Savanevičienė, and Šakys (2019, pp. 1631-1632) also found that Generation Z had the lowest work engagement of all generations. Busch, Venkitachalam, and Richards (2008, p. 55) emphasized that Generation Y is most prone to turnover and least committed to the organization. In the business world, Generation X members are satisfied, loyal, highly motivated, have respect for authority, and are able to work in the same position for many years (Serinikli, 2019, pp. 182-187).

Tang (2019, p. 24) suggested that generational boundaries are unclear, leading to inconsistencies between different understandings of generational boundaries. Costanza, Badge, Fraser, Severt, and Gade (2012, p. 391) argued that differences between generations are insignificant, while Rudolph, Rauvola, and Zacher (2017, p. 14) cautioned that generational divisions can be dangerous because they imply that individual characteristics are determined solely by generation. Similarly, Baum (2019, p. 2) challenged the notion that generations share common characteristics and values that define them and are evident in the workplace. Rather, there are individuals within generational cohorts who do not fit the general observations and characteristics of their generation (Urick, 2017, p. 5). Furthermore, attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, and values change predictably with age and not as a result of generational effects (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017, p.125).

People change throughout their lives, and these changes can be sudden or gradual, depending on environmental, geopolitical, societal, economic, technological, and organizational factors. Effective employee management involves monitoring these changes and adapting policies and practices to meet the needs of individuals and groups. Salvi, Ravid, and Constanza (2022, pp. 98-113) also noted that there is no evidence that these changes can be attributed to generational effects or that the currently conceptualized generations are functionally applicable in research or practice.

Despite these arguments, numerous studies have ex-

amined the influence of generations on workplace behavior (Becton, Walker, & Jones-Farmer, 2014; Lužar et al., 2023; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Popaitoon, 2022). A study by Urbancova et al. (2020, pp. 14-16) showed that age management has a positive impact on the strategic development of organizations, regardless of size and type. Age management can help organizations retain key personnel, attract external talent, increase employee motivation and performance, improve organizational climate and culture, and increase organizational prestige, leading to a competitive advantage. Integrating age management into organizations can facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer, promote learning and development, and reduce employee turnover by improving self-esteem, motivation, and social status.

After a thorough literature review, we formulated the following hypothesis:

H1: Employees with diverse generations cohorts prefer a transformational leadership style.

3 Methods

The study was based on a quantitative research method using an online questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections: 1) demographic information and 2) leadership style preference measurement. The demographic information included questions regarding age, gender, job role, industry, and years of work experience.

The second part included the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; Janet & Lidjan, 2013), which is a widely-used instrument for assessing leadership styles. The internal consistency coefficients of the MLQ ranged from 0.69 to 0.83 (Janet & Lidjan, 2013, p. 1). The questionnaire had 94 statements that were rated on a Likert scale (1 - strongly disagree, 2 - somewhat disagree, 3 - neutral, 4 - somewhat agree, 5 - strongly agree). The questionnaire was distributed online to 3,549 employees who were employed in various manufacturing and service organizations in south-eastern Slovenia. The respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire themselves and forward it to their respective employees or colleagues. The questionnaire was distributed to employees because their first-hand experience and direct impact of different leadership styles provide important insights into leadership preferences. Asking these employees to share the questionnaire with their colleagues was intended to provide a diverse and comprehensive data set. This "snowballing" strategy allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of leadership styles within organizations by including the views of a wider variety of roles and departments. A total of 208 respondents completed the questionnaire within the planned time frame. The demographic information of the respondents are detailed in the Results chapter.

Statistical analysis was performed using R and SPSS. We used the tests of normal distribution, specifically the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. Depending on the results, also the Kruskal-Wallis test. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used to determine the correlation between variables.

Before distributing the survey, we conducted a pilot test with a sample of 11 respondents who were not included in the final survey. The pilot test was used to assess the survey's reliability and validity. Cronbach alpha, a measure of internal consistency, was 0.84, indicating a high level of reliability for the survey instrument. Therefore, no modifications were deemed necessary based on the pilot test results.

Data were collected through an online survey in south-eastern (SE) Slovenia, a region known for its high industrial activity (e.g., automotive and pharmaceutical industries). Subsequently, the collected responses were statistically analysed.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines for social science research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were also assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

4 Results

4.1 Demographics

The questionnaire was fully completed by 208 individuals, 52.4% of whom identified themselves as female ($n = 109$). The educational level of the respondents varied: 33.65% had a professional bachelor's degree, 23.08% had an upper secondary education (European Qualifications Framework, EQF, level 4), 18.75% had a master's degree (EQF level 7), and 5.77% had EQF level 8. A small pro-

portion of respondents (4.33%) had an educational level below EQF level 4.

The generational cohort of respondents is shown in Table 1: 52.88% of respondents belonged to Generation X, 31.73% to Generation Y, 12.02% to Generation Z, and only 3.37% to Baby Boomers. None of the respondents belonged to the veteran cohort.

Of all respondents, 73 respondents (35.10%) held a leadership position, while 135 respondents (64.90%) did not.

4.2 Leadership style

We examined respondents' agreement with statements about transformational leadership styles (Table 2). Responses were given on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement. On average, respondents most strongly agree with the statement that their leader makes them feel equal ($M = 4.67$; $SD = 0.660$). On average, respondents least strongly agree with the statements that their leader treats them as individuals with unique needs and qualities ($M = 2.89$; $SD = 1.320$) and that their leader lets them know who has power and trust ($M = 3.04$; $SD = 1.193$).

Results of the respondents' agreement with the statements related to the transactional leadership style are summarised in Table 3. Responses were given on a 5-point scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree". On average, respondents strongly agreed that the leader expresses satisfaction when the employee meets expectations ($M = 4.65$; $SD = 0.671$), that the manager supports the effort shown and is helpful ($M = 4.61$; $SD = 0.665$), and that the manager makes it clear what the employee can expect when the goal is achieved ($M = 4.58$; $SD = 0.691$). On average, respondents least agreed with the statement that a manager waits until something goes wrong before taking action ($M = 1.46$; $SD = 0.797$).

Table 1: Generational cohorts

Generational cohorts	Freq.	Percentage
Born before 1943 - Veterans	0	0.00 %
Born between 1943 and 1960 – Baby Boomers	7	3.37 %
Born between 1961 and 1980 - Generation X	110	52.88 %
Born between 1981 and 1995 - Generation Y	66	31.73 %
Born after 1995 - Generation Z	25	12.02 %
Total	208	100.00 %

Table 2: Results on Transformational Leadership Style

	Totally disagree	Almost disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Almost agree	Totally agree	Total	M	SD
Review critical assumptions to verify appropriateness	0	9	24	105	70	208	4.13	0.781
	0.00%	4.33%	11.54%	50.48%	33.65%	100.00%		
Talks about values and beliefs of the organization	3	19	53	82	51	208	3.76	0.972
	1.44%	9.13%	25.48%	39.42%	24.52%	100.00%		
Looks for different options in problem solving	1	2	7	58	140	208	4.61	0.651
	0.48%	0.96%	3.37%	27.88%	67.31%	100.00%		
Talks optimistically about the future	0	1	12	61	134	208	4.58	0.625
	0.00%	0.48%	5.77%	29.33%	64.42%	100.00%		
Enthusiastically talks about the goals that need to be achieved and the things that need to be done	1	3	16	79	109	208	4.40	0.736
	0.48%	1.44%	7.69%	37.98%	52.40%	100.00%		
Emphasizes the importance of goals	2	2	13	75	116	208	4.45	0.740
	0.96%	0.96%	6.25%	36.06%	55.77%	100.00%		
Spends time teaching and coaching	2	4	11	86	105	208	4.38	0.759
	0.96%	1.92%	5.29%	41.35%	50.48%	100.00%		
Sacrifices own benefit for the good of the group	6	9	38	70	85	208	4.05	1.013
	2.88%	4.33%	18.27%	33.65%	40.87%	100.00%		
Considers me as an individual and not just as a member of the group	1	3	19	59	126	208	4.47	0.761
	0.48%	1.44%	9.13%	28.37%	60.58%	100.00%		
Acts in a way that I feel respect for him/her	1	0	11	63	133	208	4.57	0.640
	0.48%	0.00%	5.29%	30.29%	63.94%	100.00%		
Considers ethical and moral principles in own decision making	4	4	27	65	108	208	4.29	0.904
	1.92%	1.92%	12.98%	31.25%	51.92%	100.00%		
Lets us know who has power and trust	29	36	60	63	20	208	3.04	1.193
	13.94%	17.31%	28.85%	30.29%	9.62%	100.00%		
Articulates a compelling vision of the future	1	4	28	81	94	208	4.26	0.800
	0.48%	1.92%	13.46%	38.94%	45.19%	100.00%		
Treats me as a person with different qualities, needs, and abilities	43	36	58	43	28	208	2.89	1.320
	20.67%	17.31%	27.88%	20.67%	13.46%	100.00%		
Prepares us to look at the problem from different lenses	2	3	19	84	100	208	4.33	0.781
	0.96%	1.44%	9.13%	40.38%	48.08%	100.00%		

Table 2: Results on Transformational Leadership Style (continues)

	Totally disagree	Almost disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Almost agree	Totally agree	Total	M	SD
Helps me to develop and progress	2	2	8	52	144	208	4.61	0.701
	0.96%	0.96%	3.85%	25.00%	69.23%	100.00%		
Suggests new ways of accomplishing tasks	4	2	13	58	131	208	4.49	0.816
	1.92%	0.96%	6.25%	27.88%	62.98%	100.00%		
Encourages group collaboration in achieving goals	2	3	11	58	134	208	4.53	0.748
	0.96%	1.44%	5.29%	27.88%	64.42%	100.00%		
Trusts us to achieve goals	5	4	3	45	151	208	4.60	0.822
	2.40%	1.92%	1.44%	21.63%	72.60%	100.00%		
Gives us a sense of being an equal conversational partner	2	2	4	47	153	208	4.67	0.660
	0.96%	0.96%	1.92%	22.60%	73.56%	100.00%		

Note: M – mean; SD – standard deviation

Table 3: Results on Transactional Leadership Style

	Totally disagree	Almost disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Almost agree	Totally agree	Total	M	SD
Doesn't get involved in solving problems until they become serious	40	47	36	61	24	208	2.91	1.323
	19.23%	22.60%	17.31%	29.33%	11.54%	100.00%		
Focuses his/her attention on irregularities, errors, exceptions, and deviations from the standards	53	46	48	44	17	208	2.64	1.289
	25.48%	22.12%	23.08%	21.15%	8.17%	100.00%		
Waits for things to go wrong before taking action	143	43	16	4	2	208	1.46	0.797
	68.75%	20.67%	7.69%	1.92%	0.96%	100.00%		
Sticks to the principle of "don't fix it until it's broken".	86	49	48	18	7	208	2.09	1.136
	41.35%	23.56%	23.08%	8.65%	3.37%	100.00%		
Waits until a problem becomes serious before addressing it	103	63	25	13	4	208	1.81	1.003
	49.52%	30.29%	12.02%	6.25%	1.92%	100.00%		

Table 3: Results on Transactional Leadership Style (continues)

	Totally disagree	Almost disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Almost agree	Totally agree	Total	M	SD
Focuses his/her attention on complaints and mistakes	68	62	32	33	13	208	2.33	1.255
	32.69%	29.81%	15.38%	15.87%	6.25%	100.00%		
Remembers every mistake made	50	65	61	24	8	208	2.40	1.090
	24.04%	31.25%	29.33%	11.54%	3.85%	100.00%		
Directs my attention to mistakes to meet standards	51	41	63	40	13	208	2.63	1.221
	24.52%	19.71%	30.29%	19.23%	6.25%	100.00%		

Note: M – mean; SD – standard deviation

Table 4: Results on Laissez-Faire Leadership Style

	Totally disagree	Almost disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Almost agree	Totally agree	Total	M	SD
Does not want to get involved in solving important issues	117	58	15	15	3	208	1.70	0.983
	56.25%	27.88%	7.21%	7.21%	1.44%	100.00%		
Is absent when I need him/her	158	33	12	3	2	208	1.36	0.741
	75.96%	15.87%	5.77%	1.44%	0.96%	100.00%		
Avoids making decisions	159	28	9	10	2	208	1.40	0.857
	76.44%	13.46%	4.33%	4.81%	0.96%	100.00%		
Responds with a delay in solving problems	143	47	8	7	3	208	1.46	0.839
	68.75%	22.60%	3.85%	3.37%	1.44%	100.00%		

Note: M – mean; SD – standard deviation

Table 4 summarises the results of respondents' agreement with statements about laissez-faire leadership style. Again, responses were given on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement. On average, respondents strongly disagree that the leader does not want to get involved in solving important issues ($M = 1.70$; $SD = 0.983$) and strongly disagree with the statement that the leader is late in responding to problems ($M = 1.46$; $SD = 0.839$). On average, respondents disagree at all that the manager avoids making decisions ($M = 1.40$; $SD = 0.857$), and on average, respondents disagree at all that the manager is absent when needed ($M = 1.36$; $SD = 0.741$).

Prior to calculating preferred leadership style by generational cohort, Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests for normal distribution were performed and were statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$).

Because leadership styles are not normally distributed, we used the Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test, the results of which are presented in Table 5. The Kruskal-Wallis test is statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$) only for the transactional leadership style, indicating that there are statistically significant differences in transactional leadership style by generational cohort. The transactional leadership style is most preferred by the Baby Boomer generation and least preferred by Generation Z, with preference for the transactional leadership style decreasing with younger generations. There are no statistically significant differences between birth cohorts for the other leadership styles ($p > 0.05$).

Table 5: Kruskal-Wallis test for leadership style by generational cohort

	Generational cohort	n	Mean range	Mean score (standard deviation)	Kruskal-Wallis test (p)
Transformational leadership	Born between 1943 and 1960 – Baby Boomers	7	120.29	4.40 (0.23)	0.528
	Born between 1961 and 1980 - Generation X	110	103.60	4.25 (0.44)	(0.913)
	Born between 1981 and 1995 – Generation Y	66	103.81	4.25 (0.47)	
	Born after 1995 - Generation Z	25	105.84	4.26 (0.49)	
	Total	208			
Transactional leadership	Born between 1943 and 1960 – Baby Boomers	7	166.86	2.95 (0.55)	8.046
	Born between 1961 and 1980 - Generation X	110	104.19	2.27 (0.62)	0.045
	Born between 1981 and 1995 – Generation Y	66	100.32	2.27 (0.62)	
	Born after 1995 - Generation Z	25	99.46	2.21 (0.57)	
	Total	208			
Laissez-faire leadership	Born between 1943 and 1960 – Baby Boomers	7	112.00	1.46 (0.53)	1.296
	Born between 1961 and 1980 - Generation X	110	107.84	1.52 (0.64)	(0.730)
	Born between 1981 and 1995 – Generation Y	66	98.17	1.44 (0.68)	
	Born after 1995 - Generation Z	25	104.40	1.43 (0.48)	
	Total	208			

5 Discussion and Conclusion

From the results presented in Tables 2, 3, and 4, respondents most preferred the transformational leadership style, followed by the transactional leadership style, and least preferred the laissez-faire leadership style. Transformational leaders are characterized by their ability to inspire and motivate their employees, emphasize values and beliefs, respond to individual needs, and foster a sense of collaboration and trust. These characteristics were highly valued by respondents, indicating that employees appreciate leaders who are proactive, visionary, and people-oriented.

While the transactional leadership style is not rated as highly as the transformational style, some aspects were still rated positively, such as satisfaction when employees meet expectations and clear goal setting. However, it is important to note that transactional leadership aspects that

focus on mistakes and errors or waiting for problems to occur before addressing them were not well received, suggesting that employees prefer a more proactive approach to problem solving and support from their leaders.

The laissez-faire leadership style was least preferred by respondents, with most respondents disagreeing with statements describing a leader who avoids making decisions, is absent when needed, and is not involved in solving important problems. This suggests that employees generally do not appreciate leaders who lack engagement and involvement in their work.

As shown in Table 5, there are statistically significant differences in preference for transactional leadership style by generation, with the Baby Boomer generation showing the highest preference and Generation Z showing the lowest preference. This may indicate that older generations are more accustomed to a transactional leadership approach, while younger generations are more likely to expect a

transformational style that emphasizes collaboration, trust, and individual consideration. The aim of our research was to investigate the differences between the different generations and preference of leadership style. We used existing questionnaires to survey employees in service and production organizations in SE Slovenia. Respondents cited transformational leadership as the most preferred leadership style, followed by transactional leadership, and preferred laissez-faire leadership the least. The results showed that there was no significant difference in the way respondents preferred to be led. There is a statistically significant difference in preference for the transactional leadership style across generations, with the Baby Boomer generation preferring it the most and Generation Z preferring it the least. This difference was not observed for transformational and laissez-faire leadership styles.

Most respondents prefer a transformational leadership style, followed by a transactional style, and the least preferred is the laissez-faire leadership style. Looking at the highest scoring responses, it appears that employees essentially prefer a combination of transformational and transactional leadership styles. The results of our study are consistent with Senica (2009, pp. 6-7), who suggested that the optimal profile of a leader is to cultivate a transformational leadership style to the highest degree, a transactional leadership style to a somewhat lesser degree, and a laissez-faire leadership style to the lowest degree possible. The preference for transactional leadership decreases with younger generations. As Baum (2019, p. 7) explained, to lead successfully, a leader seeks to identify the qualities and characteristics of each individual on their team and to apply and integrate different leadership styles based on insights and knowledge.

Based on the research findings we suggest that organizations train and educate leaders when to use specific leadership styles. Training should not be limited to traditional methods, but should also include reflection, shadowing, coworking programs and so on.

Considering that the characteristics of generational cohorts are strongly influenced by the specific environment in which they live, highlights the importance of research that is based on data from the local environment. Applying results from other environments may lead to biased conclusions. Because we did not find any research on a similar topic in Slovenia, our study makes an additional scholarly contribution and presents the perceptions and situation of employees in the service and production sectors in this area.

We limited our study to all service and production organizations in south-eastern Slovenia. The sample size does not guarantee proportional representation within each generational cohort and is a limitation in generalising to a broader population. A longer period than the 21-day survey could have helped increase the number of completed questionnaires; however, sufficient responses were received to

continue the study. The survey was conducted cross-sectionally, in the current situation and at the current time, and shows the perceptions of respondents at a particular point in time. A survey conducted at a different point in time or longitudinally may have yielded different results. Longitudinal research is needed to explore how preferences may change over time as individuals progress through their careers and as societal values evolve. Only three contemporary leadership styles were studied. Had several different leadership styles been included in the survey, the results on preferred leadership style may have been different. The use of self-report measures, such as the MLQ, may introduce response bias, as participants might respond in a socially desirable manner or may not accurately assess their own preferences. Future studies could include observational or behavioural measures to complement self-report data. The study focused on generational cohorts as the primary independent variable, which may overlook other important factors that influence leadership style preferences, such as individual personality traits, cultural background, and organizational culture. Future research should consider these additional factors when examining leadership style preferences. The sample was drawn from a diverse range of industries, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to specific sectors or job roles. Further research could focus on specific industries or professions to better understand the nuances of leadership style preferences within those contexts.

In reviewing the literature, we found that over the past two decades, much of the research has been conducted on the topic of age in the workplace. This is primarily due to demographic changes and the ageing population (Rudolph & Zacher, 2022). We suggest that researchers focus on the methodological gaps and understanding of age in the workplace as an equivalent or indicator of life and years of experience. In examining the work aspect of workers and ageing from a life span perspective, it would be instructive to bring together research fields and seek partnerships among psychologists, sociologists, economists, and other researchers to make more progress in this area.

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